

How Much Would You Pay To Avoid Traffic? Illinois and 'Congestion Pricing'

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There is absolutely no truth to the rumor that the Eisenhower Expressway was so named because trying to pass through it at rush hour can be a slog worthy of Omaha Beach on D-Day.

That said, the congestion is often epic where the Ike narrows in Oak Park from four lanes in each direction to three.

"It's way worse than it used to be and it gets worse every year," said attorney David Dranoff, a resident of the western suburb who often commutes by car to and from his Loop office.

In today's era of ever-tightening public resources, fixing the bottleneck defies traditional road-building solutions. But a different approach that borrows from Uber's fluctuating pricing strategy and a theme park express pass is being eyed by experts to finance long-overdue



improvements on the Eisenhower and other roads where the express long ago disappeared from expressway.

It is called congestion pricing, and the goal is to pay for the grafting of toll lanes on to existing expressways. The new hybrid highway would then remain free for drivers unwilling or unable to pay while others could buy their way into the fast lane by paying tolls that fluctuate depending on traffic.

“Congestion pricing is an important tool, a way to use technology to get better results for the public,” said Joseph Szabo, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

While such a concept would be new to Illinois, it is already a reality in fast-growing metro areas such as Seattle, Atlanta and Miami where tolled express lanes, separated by barriers, run parallel to free lanes. Electronic signs posted along routes flash rates for various segments ahead, with tolls rising where traffic backs up and falling when things get smooth.

In Seattle, prices are updated every five minutes.

Putting the concept into reality across the nation would likely require a psychological leap for many drivers. The post-World War II interstate highway system was an equalizer—making travel quick and affordable for the middle class, though federal and state gas tax revenues used to construct and maintain such roads meant they were never truly free.

Technology now may offer a way to ease ever-present traffic jams, but the solution creates two classes of service, underscoring the perception of a widening gap between the wealthy and everyone else.

Advocates contend the tradeoffs are worth it. Delays cost the region \$7 billion a year in lost fuel and productivity, according to CMAP.

Not only does congestion impair quality of life, it hinders the movement of truck traffic, putting the region’s strategic advantage as a transportation hub at risk. The Stevenson Expressway alone is congested up to 10 hours a day, according to the Illinois Department of Transportation.



A rendering of proposed modifications to the Stevenson. (Illinois Dept. of Transportation)

Government units in Illinois have in the past explored ways of introducing congestion pricing. Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner in 2016 proposed a public-private partnership that would have allowed a private firm to build new toll lanes on parts of the Stevenson. The move required approval from state lawmakers but was blocked by Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan.

CMAP, in a 2012 report, modeled congestion pricing on five highways, the Stevenson, the Eisenhower, the Kennedy, the Elgin O'Hare West Bypass and the Central Lake County Corridor, with each road receiving one, two or three new lanes.

The study under former CMAP Executive Director Randy Blankenhorn—currently Rauner's transportation secretary—found drivers using express lanes during morning peak would have their trips shortened by 31 to 66 percent. Congestion delays on the adjacent free lanes would drop by 24 to 33 percent, CMAP found.

A breakthrough of sorts came in recent weeks when Blankenhorn joined with Robert Schillerstrom, chairman of the agency that runs the current Illinois tollway system, to ask CMAP to develop a single vision to modernize the expressway system.

The two agencies have had little reason to cooperate in the past.

While IDOT is saddled with a growing backlog of roads and bridges in need of repair at a time when state and federal funding is uncertain, the Tollway is self-sufficient and readily funds capital projects, including reconstruction and expansion.

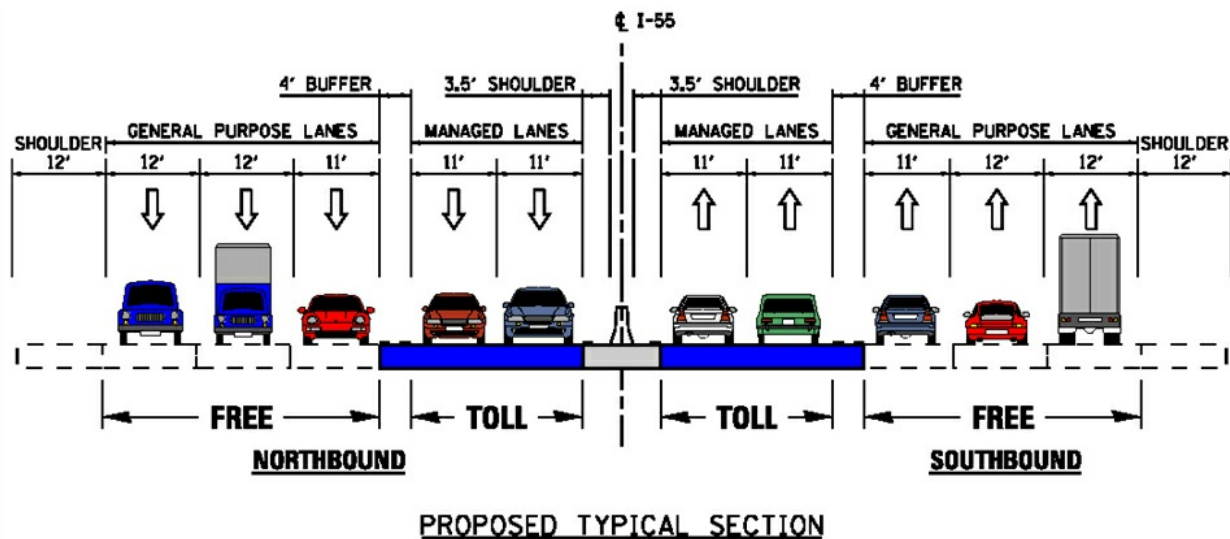
“The Tollway has funds and IDOT does not,” said Hani Mahmassani, a professor at the McCormick School of Engineering at Northwestern University.

Blankenhorn is an ex-officio member of the Tollway board, and he and Schillerstrom have met monthly since their respective appointments in early 2015. Blankenhorn in an interview said the two have discussed approaches to upgrade an aging transportation system. “The public doesn’t care who owns what—if it’s Tollway or an IDOT road,” he said. “What does the system of the 21st Century look like? We don’t want to build 1950s interstates anymore.” Schillerstrom was unavailable for an interview.

The pair asked CMAP to take a holistic look at the Chicago area’s expressway system. The planning agency is due to deliver recommendations on relieving congestion by April.

Federal law bars state transportation departments from introducing tolls on already- operating free highways unless new capacity is opened. But the U.S. Department of Transportation has been increasingly flexible and open to granting waivers for new approaches, Mahmassani said.

That leaves the state with a range of alternatives, officials said. IDOT, for example, could add new lanes on the Eisenhower and Stevenson that would charge tolls. More radically, the state could decommission those expressways and hand them over to the Tollway to operate, CMAP officials said. Conceivably, there could be a mix of IDOT and Tollway management. Or the public-private partnership model could be pursued again.



A drawing details proposed toll lanes on the Stevenson. (Illinois Dept. of Transportation)

IDOT is committed to pursuing a public-private partnership for the Stevenson, Blankenhorn said. Adding capacity by converting the shoulder is a relatively fast and inexpensive way to modernize the road and generate revenue from a tolled lane. Construction costs are estimated at \$400 million over two years. Completing I-55 is a necessary prelude to a far larger project as it needs to function as a reliever for the Eisenhower, which requires full reconstruction.

“The Eisenhower is past its useful life,” said Audrey Wennink, director of transportation at the

Metropolitan Planning Council.

IDOT recently received federal approval for a plan to overhaul the Ike, with an added fourth lane in each direction between Austin Boulevard in Oak Park and Mannheim Road in Hillside and a single managed or tolled lane in either direction between Mannheim and Racine Avenue in Chicago. Three lanes in each direction would remain free.

The stumbling block: an estimated \$2.7 billion price tag. Pledging a future revenue stream from lanes that charge tolls would pay for part, though not all, of the reconstruction, whether in public or private hands. The expressway overhaul involves digging out and replacing concrete to the ground level, Blankenhorn said. The state is constrained by its notch-below-junk rating but could still float bonds, as could the Tollway, he added.

Advocates of congestion pricing will have to address the perception that “Lexus lanes” are a perk for affluent drivers who can afford to pay for the privilege of zipping by cars on the free portions.

The Seattle area two years ago opened toll lanes on a 21.9-mile stretch of I-405, following a pilot project on 14.2 -miles of a state road nine years earlier.

A spokesman for the Washington State Department of Transportation said surveys show 60 percent of motorists are happy to have a choice and 70 percent use the tolled lanes one to five times per month. The top vehicles traveling the lanes aren’t luxury cars but Fords and Chevrolets, he said. Survey respondents said they used the lanes when they were running late for work or needed to pick up a child.

A trip between suburban Bellevue and Lynnwood that used to take 26 minutes on average and 39 minutes on a bad day now takes 16 to 19 minutes, department statistics show. Commute times in the free lanes also improved.

Dynamic pricing isn’t the only tool for reducing congestion. Among the more incremental measures are electronic signs with sensors that gather data on accidents and slowdowns ahead, providing motorists the chance to exit for alternate routes. But the introduction of managed lanes has the potential to be the most cost-effective remedy, officials say.

It may be difficult to convince people to pay for something they’re not accustomed to directly paying for. But people are wasting so much time in traffic, said Wennink of MPC, that “they may be willing to pay for something that works and they need.”

Blankenhorn said the idea would seem logical to many drivers. “People who sit in that traffic every day on the Eisenhower say, “just tell me how much I gotta pay to get out of here.”